

Keeping Your Board Relationship Solid

By Bob Kobielush

THE RELATIONSHIP YOU FORM WITH YOUR BOARD, as ministry director, will either make or break you, and your ministry. While you may feel like it's just another impediment to progress, it's actually a critical piece of your landscape. Learning to be effective in this arena is a unique and necessary skill. Here are some maxims that could hold the key to your success.

- **Your board has a personality that morphs.** Every time a new board member is added or one leaves or leadership roles change the personality of the board will change. As you try to connect your board with the realities of your ministry, you must be aware of these changes and adapt your methods and message accordingly. When a new chairperson takes charge, immediately try to enter that person's mind, get acquainted with his or her world, and learn what he or she likes and what biases may exist. You don't want surprises at your chairperson's first board meeting.
- **Every board needs to hear the solutions or options offered by the director.** And then the board needs to step to the plate and make a decision. A "ringing-hands executive" is never a welcome leader. Right or wrong (we hope more *right* than wrong) boards like to deal with decisive—but not obstinate—leaders. Sometimes an issue may be presented to the board for discussion without the need for an immediate decision, however state that before you begin the discussion.
- **Most of what happens at the board meeting should be a result of the director's preparation.** This starts with the agenda. Building an agenda for a meeting is not a unilateral exercise of either the director or the chair. My preference is to have the director build the agenda and then give it to the chairperson for review and approval.
- **Do everything you can do to make sure board members' needs are met at the board meeting.** Make sure the surroundings are conducive for higher thinking by meeting in a comfortable room, preferably with a window, tables in a hollow square, good seating arrangement, good lighting, some snacks and drinks, and the like. Always have extra handouts for those who don't bring the needed materials.
- **Seating can be in various arrangements, but recognize that it makes a statement.** As the director of your ministry, sit near the chairman so you'll be able to provide mutual counsel during the meeting. It also makes a statement that this is a team effort.
- **Avoid triangulation!** This occurs when a third person enters a primary relationship between two people and either complicates or circumvents direct communication between the two. The board-director-staff system is pregnant with triangulation pitfalls. The most common one occurs when staff and board (and/or its individual members) consult to make decisions and accomplish tasks. There are times when the staff and board should confer, but never at the expense of confusing roles. Triangulation can also occur between standing committees and board members, or between board members and the director, leaving the chairman on the

outside. Seeking counsel or third-party input is healthy, but triangulation—unless necessary to resolve a major conflict between two groups—is not.

- **Build on the right foundation.** Never start a meeting without praying, sharing a scriptural truth, and allowing time for personal expression of needs or praises. This is God's work, requiring God's Spirit for understanding and power in helping people in their spiritual journeys.
- **Don't appoint a committee or task force without first asking, "What will be its specific charge?"** Also ask, "What's the timeline for this task?" and "Is this the best way to get the job done?" Alternatives to complicating the system are to ask the director to work with another individual—such as a staff person, board member, consultant, or volunteer—and bring back a recommendation, or appoint someone to bring back a report (it must be reviewed by the board chairperson and director before it's presented, however), or simply refer the matter back to the director for more work. Often this last option is more efficient and effective than having another group appointed to whom the director is now responsible.
- **Never work for a board that doesn't clearly define your role and its expectations for you, or bother to give you an annual evaluation.** Even if you have to prepare the expectations yourself (such as job description, standards of performance, etc.) and design the evaluation process, do it and get the board to discuss, approve and implement it. Undefined expectations and never-evaluated performance often result in a tragic dilemma.
- **The best test of your leadership and relationship with the board occurs in tough times.** It's often difficult for boards to have the tenacity, understanding and commitment to enter a crisis and exercise leadership. These situations are the breeding ground for successful leaders who are willing to take the heat, move forward decisively, and weigh the consequences in the crucible of what they believe is best for the ministry.

The only time the Christian journey is a solitary experience is when you make the decision to become a believer. After that, all of life is intended to be lived in community—and your work with the board is no exception.

Suggested Action Steps:

- Meet your chairperson to get better acquainted and go over the points in this article.
- Develop an evaluation form that assists board members in recording their observations about the current board process.
- Prepare a set of job expectations for yourself, and then review them with the board.
- Make plans with your chairperson for an annual evaluation of your performance.

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